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The Worst-Kept Secret War

When asked the other day if he could confirm a report in The Times that the C.I.A. is mobilizing a secret war against Nicaragua, President Reagan replied: "No, and I don't think The New York Times can." But the growing evidence of American involvement can't be shrugged off so blandly. There's nothing secret any more about the training of exile armies in Florida and the recurrent border raids into Nicaragua by insurgents claiming C.I.A. help; all this has been widely reported for months.

Whatever American agents may be doing to help Honduras prevent the use of its territory for arms smuggling to El Salvador, it seems beyond doubt that they are also engaged in some direct actions in Nicaragua. The manifest purpose is to threaten a frontal assault on the leftist Sandinist regime. Undeniably, some of the leaders of the insurgent force are Nicaraguans associated with the discredited Somoza dictatorship.

These are, to begin with, illegal activities. The Neutrality Act expressly forbids the raising of secret armies to unseat a regime that the United States recognizes as lawful. Flouting that law is no way to rally the hemisphere against meddling by Cuba and Nicaragua in other nations' conflicts.

Even if these secret armies were never meant to be used in a big way, they are a dangerous instrument of diplomacy. Give people with a political grudge a gun and they maneuver to fire it. If they do, they are impossible to disown. Even if they don't, they are extremely difficult to disband.

If the idea here was to use the threat of insurgency to win bargaining concessions from Nicaragua, the idea is bound to misfire. Such threats tend

to confirm the darkest fears of suspicious adversaries and make them more truculent, not accommodating.

It is perfectly true that an acceptable doctrine of non-intervention has to be respected by all parties. If it were proven that Nicaragua is indeed violating the territory of Honduras to funnel weapons to El Salvador, some reprisal in kind might be justifiable. But the evidence suggests that it is Nicaraguan territory, not Honduras, that is being systematically violated.

A final justification for covert warfare might be a clear showing that truly vital American interests are at risk, and beyond the reach of diplomacy. No such showing has been made, either to the American people or to our Latin friends. To the contrary, President Betancur of Colombia, an independent-minded conservative, last week risked Mr. Reagan's displeasure by appealing for negotiations with both Nicaragua and Cuba.

That was a foretaste of how Latin America would react to unilateral United States interventions. Mr. Reagan, by way of polite reply, expressed his wish to see "the withdrawal of all — I repeat all — foreign military advisers in Central America."

Nicaragua contends that it is prepared to negotiate. A proper response would find Washington testing that claim, documenting its charges of Nicaragua's interference in other countries and persuading other Latin nations to join in condemning the import of Communist arms. The improper response is to deny the undeniable, in the false hope that the C.I.A. hand can somehow be hidden. That illusion should have died at the Bay of Pigs.